

From Austerity to Disentitlement: The Transformation of Food Stamps in the US, 1969–1984

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This article traces the changing terrain of the food stamp program in the pivotal decade of the 1970s. In 1969, President Richard Nixon promised to put an end to hunger in America, “for all time.” However, in the fifteen years following this announcement, policymakers erected boundaries around the scope of public food welfare programs. In this article, the author highlights key continuities between earlier, modest attempts at program reform under Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter and the later Reagan-era assault on welfare spending of the early 1980s.

INTRODUCTION

On 9 January 1984, President Ronald Reagan’s Task Force on Food Assistance released its findings on hunger in the United States. Six months earlier, the administration had pulled together the task force in reaction to negative press on the issue, in particular the 19 July 1983 *New York Times* front-page, above-the-fold story “US Hunger on the Rise Despite Swelling of Food Surpluses.”¹ Reagan launched the Task Force on Food Assistance on 2 August 1983 as a “no-holds-barred study” into food assistance in the country. However, he was skeptical of claims of hunger at home. In the memo announcing the study committee’s formation, Reagan described being “perplexed” by increasing accounts of hunger.² After six months of study, and in line with the President’s skepticism, the task force claimed they could not “report definitive evidence on the extent of hunger as it is commonly defined.” There existed “little systematic evidence of widespread” undernutrition, the term used by health professionals to indicate physiological problems arising due to a lack of food. On the more general understanding of hunger as someone’s inability “to obtain adequate amounts of food,” the

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¹ Robert Pear, “U.S. Hunger on the Rise Despite Swelling of Food Surpluses,” *New York Times*, 19 July 1983, 1.

² Ronald Reagan, “Memorandum on Establishing a Task Force on Food Assistance,” 2 Aug. 1983, The American Presidency Project, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262917.

group heard “convincing testimony” that hunger of this nature generally exists. However, they concluded that “the number of such hungry people cannot be definitively measured.”³ Being unable to measure the problem, it was high impossible to know “how much effort in the food assistance area is sufficient.”⁴ In effect, the task force defined its way out of responding to the problem and exonerated itself of the responsibility to (re)define a solution to hunger, thereby curtailing federal responsibility from ensuring that the poor had access to an adequate diet.

That the task force could not definitively identify hunger marks a sharp change from the nation’s response to the problem fifteen years earlier. Following public and political antihunger organizing in the 1950s and 1960s, hunger became a public issue requiring increased federal intervention.⁵ In a special address to Congress in May 1969, President Richard Nixon responded to demands for action, declaring, “the moment is at hand to put an end to hunger in America itself. For all time.”⁶ In response to Nixon’s call, Congress authorized funding to immediately expand the food stamp program, increase school lunch provision, and start a national school breakfast program. Lastly, legislators created a new program to provide supplemental nutrition to women, infants, and children, known more commonly today as WIC. In much of the literature, the 1970s is a decade of food program growth.⁷ But in this article, I argue for a reinterpretation of food welfare during the 1970s by demonstrating key continuities between earlier modest attempts at program reform and the Reagan-era assault on welfare spending.

Even within the 1969 address, Nixon undercut his point about hunger, saying “precise factual descriptions of its extent are not presently available.”⁸ Shortly following Nixon’s announcement, his administration distanced itself

³ *Report of the President’s Task Force on Food Assistance* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1984), xiv–xv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁵ On the evolution of the food stamp program up to the 1960s see Ardith Maney, *Still Hungry After All These Years* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 19–31; Rachel Louise Moran, “Consuming Relief: Food Stamps and the New Welfare of the New Deal,” *Journal of American History*, 97, 4 (1 March 2011), 1001–22; and Janet Poppendieck, *Bread Lines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 177–204. For accounts of hunger as part of 1960s welfare rights movement see Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984), especially chapter 2, and Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005), especially chapter 6.

⁶ Richard Nixon, “Special Message to the Congress Recommending a Program to End Hunger in America,” 6 May 1969, The American Presidency Project, at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239022>.

⁷ Maney; Poppendieck; and Ronald Frederick King, *Budgeting Entitlements: The Politics of Food Stamps* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000).

⁸ Nixon.

from the promise to end hunger, arguing that antihunger programs were too expensive. The Ford and Carter administrations echoed these claims, making calls to cut food assistance in the name of budget austerity. In addition, program expansion meant that beneficiaries were increasingly diverse.⁹ Racial concerns had long shaped discussions of welfare, especially in the South, but the perceived shift in recipients' race and deservingness by the 1970s fueled national debates on food welfare, though austerity-minded politicians were careful to frame their logic for cost cutting as race-neutral. By the 1980s, politicians were working in a different frame, one seeking to disentitle recipients to benefits by making them ineligible for programs that a decade earlier were designed to serve them. While government funding for food assistance retreated, hunger remained a pressing political and personal issue for the tens of millions of people who struggled to obtain an adequate diet.

This article charts the changing political framing of hunger, primarily at the presidential level. More modest attempts at program reform by the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations framed budget politics as a key reason to control food program growth. However, this focus on the budget "redirected the trajectory" of food welfare programs, ushering in an era of shrinking costs regardless of the fiscal climate.¹⁰ By the 1980s, this change from austerity to disentitlement enabled politicians to cut the largest piece of the food safety net – the food stamp program.

From its origins in 1930s surplus agricultural distribution, the food stamp program (FSP) had grown into one of the largest safety net programs by the 1970s.¹¹ President Lyndon B. Johnson set national standards for food stamps when he signed the Food Stamp Act into law in 1964 as part of a larger slate of Great Society programs designed to combat poverty and inequality. In an earlier iteration of the FSP from 1939 to 1943, legislators designed the program to incentivize the sale of agricultural products deemed "in surplus" at subsidized cost to consumers. But with the reboot in 1964 the administration shifted the benefits in favor of consumers over producers, enabling food stamp recipients to purchase almost any food at approved grocers.¹²

⁹ For a few examples of the larger literature on the "mainstreaming" of racial prejudice in welfare, moving debates out from the South to national politics in the 1960s, see Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Scott J. Spitzer, "The Emergence of Race in National Welfare Politics: The 1962 and 1967 Amendments to AFDC," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 5, 1 (2012), 75–112.

¹⁰ See Eva Bertram, "Democratic Divisions in the 1960s Road to Welfare Reform," *Political Science Quarterly*, 126, 4 (2011–12), 580.

¹¹ According to Maney, "During the 1980s [food aid policy] was second only to Medicaid and Social Security in its claims on the federal treasury." Maney, 2.

¹² For a comprehensive account of the early food stamp program, see Poppendieck.

The act symbolized the first steps in creating a right to food assistance as national authority allowed for programs in any county that desired one. Even so, the Food Stamp Program served only 367,000 participants in forty-three counties in 1964.¹³ But hunger came to the headlines in the late 1960s, prompting Congress to pass more expansive food stamp legislation.¹⁴ Looser eligibility criteria, enacted in the early 1970s, as well as nationalization of the program, brought millions more participants, including more beneficiaries of color. People were automatically eligible to participate if they received cash assistance, for example through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), or had incomes near or below the poverty line. In exchange for a small cash payment at the beginning of the month, dubbed the purchase price, participants received a food stamp coupon booklet of a value that enabled them to purchase food to meet (in theory) their minimum nutritional requirements.¹⁵ These changes, in turn, brought an increasingly racialized image of the program, and radically ratcheted up program costs. It is in this context that this article explores politicians' efforts to first control and then shrink the food stamp program.

To tell this story, this article first addresses program growth during the 1970s. It then traces early examples of budget austerity in the food stamp program under Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, as well as the changing rhetoric around welfare and food stamps that created a more friendly environment for discussions of budget cuts. According to Ford and Carter, hunger was a problem, but one too large to be fully solved through public expenditures. While congressional reluctance and public pushback stopped adoption or implementation of some of these measures in the FSP, debates over budget cuts in the name of austerity during the 1970s opened the door for a more radical politics of disenfranchisement under President Ronald Reagan. Further, the underlying message became that the FSP was yet another

¹³ Hilary Hoynes and Diane W. Schanzenbach, "The Introduction of the Food Stamp Program: Impacts on Food Consumption and Family Well-Being," paper presented at the Center for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science, 24 July 2006, 21, at cep.lse.ac.uk/seminarpapers/13-10-06-HOY.pdf.

¹⁴ See, for example, Joseph A. Loftus, "Johnson Is Asked to Rush Food Aid: 9 Senators Cite Mississippi Hunger and Malnutrition," *New York Times*, 30 April 1930, 51; "Senators Ask Emergency 'Delta' Food," *Washington Post*, 30 April 1967; Robert Sherrill, "It Isn't True That Nobody Starves in America," *New York Times*, 4 June 1967, 12; and Nan Robertson, "Severe Hunger Found in Mississippi," *New York Times*, 16 June 1967, 14.

¹⁵ US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *A Concise History of the Food Stamp Program*, by Joe Richardson, 79-1244 EPW (1979), 3. Food stamp values were tied to the value of the Thrifty Food Plan, a basket of goods defined by the USDA "to be adequate for household members to obtain the recommended daily allowances of key nutrients, as specified by the National Academy of Sciences." King, 40.

program directed towards the undeserving poor, increasingly imagined as women of color.

By the 1980s, the political conversation shifted from how much to cut from the food stamp program in the name of austerity, to questioning the utility of the food stamp program at all. Conservative politicians, including Reagan himself, argued that hunger could be better met by local and private initiatives. This meant that program cuts were not limited belt tightening in a time of economic uncertainty but rather part of a broader reimagining of the role of welfare assistance to the poor. This shift undid the limited consensus on federal intervention into the problem of hunger, marking the end of liberal legislative superiority in Congress to frame and fund food assistance. To understand the shift in framing hunger from Nixon's 1969 declaration to the 1984 task force findings requires exploring the longer project of political, legislative, and public ideas about who was ultimately responsible to act against hunger in the United States.

DRIVERS OF FOOD STAMP PROGRAM GROWTH IN THE 1970S

Public food welfare programs grew throughout the 1970s to better meet the food and nutritional needs of Americans during an economically challenging decade. The food stamp program expanded, largely replacing an earlier (and less generous) commodity distribution program. Administrative and legislative changes in the early 1970s expanded food welfare programs' reach and equalized benefits, all backed by increasing public expenditures. Through this lens, and according to some scholars of the food stamp program, Nixon's actions in the early 1970s drove the expansion of food welfare programs following slow growth during the Johnson years.¹⁶ There were, however, three more important reasons for the program's expansion. The first was the continuing legacy of food welfare advocacy and activism of the 1960s.¹⁷ Local antihunger advocates came together on a regional, then national, scale to keep hunger in the public

¹⁶ Some historians of welfare have gone so far as to call Nixon the last Social Democrat, pointing in particular to expansion in the food stamp program by 1974. See, for example, Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 122. Marissa Chappell also discusses the expansion of the FSP under Nixon, but highlights that these gains were directed more towards the working poor than mothers on AFDC. Marissa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 107. See also King, 54: "The new Republican administration of Richard Nixon was far more sympathetic to nutrition issues and more willing to advance a costly policy initiative than the outgoing Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson."

¹⁷ For example, see Nick Kotz, *Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969); and Judith Segal, *Food for the Hungry: The*

eye. They successfully lobbied for Congressional support to expand food stamps and created a political constituency around this issue. Second, a food welfare coalition became further entrenched during the 1970s. Advocacy networks were formalized in think tanks and gained support from a wave of liberal legislators elected in 1974. The third, and perhaps largest, factor was the deteriorating US economy. Stagnant wages, high unemployment, and rising food prices meant that more people could not afford enough to eat. They turned to the newly liberalized food stamp program to make ends meet.

Upon entering office, Nixon had to take hunger seriously given public interest in the issue following a surge of attention to the problem in the late 1960s.¹⁸ And some staff members believed that focussing on hunger could help the administration. A Nixon staffer noted, “there is real promise in the newly-emerged recognition that malnutrition is a national problem against which this administration can launch a major effort with real pay off.”¹⁹ Nixon’s advisers also described hunger as a pressing problem. Just two months after Nixon’s inauguration, the Council for Urban Affairs committee on food noted that the dimensions of poverty-related malnutrition remained undefined. However, writing this finding in all capital letters, “SUCH KNOWLEDGE AS WE DO HAVE INDICATES THAT MALNUTRITION AMONG THE POOR IS IN FACT A SERIOUS PROBLEM.”²⁰ After explaining the background of food programs and hunger since the early 1960s, they provided specific recommendations in each area of food program operations.²¹ Additional funds for the FSP made up most proposed new outlays in their report.

Nixon became the first and only President to pledge to end hunger in America, but he went further, by convening a White House Conference on

Reluctant Society, Policy Studies in Employment and Welfare 4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970).

¹⁸ For example, the CBS documentary *Hunger in America* aired in the midst of the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign, an effort to bring attention to the needs of the poor where hundreds occupied the National Mall. *Hunger in America*, produced by Martin Carr and Don Hewitt, featuring Charles Kuralt, aired on 21 May 1968 on CBS.

¹⁹ Memo, Andy Rome to Pat Moynihan; “Comments on Suggested Nutrition Programs and Their Financing,” 13 March 1969, folder “Health – Hunger and Malnutrition 3-1” (2) (2 of 3), Box 17, Staff Member and Office Files, John R. Price Papers, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA (hereafter Nixon Library).

²⁰ “Report of the Committee of the Urban Affairs Council on Food and Nutrition,” 17 March 1969, 1, folder “HE 3-1 Executive,” Box 13, White House Central Files; Nixon Library.

²¹ Recommendations were broken out across the following areas: FSP, commodity program, Special Supplemental Food Program, Child Nutrition (mostly school lunches), the role of private business, volunteers, a national food/malnutrition survey, and avenues for nutrition research and education.

Food, Nutrition, and Health in December 1969. Convening three thousand delegates in DC over four days, the conference aimed to explore the root causes of hunger and malnutrition and seek input from the public on how to solve these problems. Of note, conference organizers ensured financial assistance to the poor to attend, paying for transportation and lodging for a few hundred delegates. But even this small measure to ensure that roughly 10 percent of delegates were beneficiaries of food programs was a major point of contention with the Nixon administration. The recently appointed director of the Office for Economic Opportunity, Donald Rumsfeld, allegedly withheld conference funds and “urged” conference organizer “Dr. Mayer to limit Negro participants to ‘doctors, nurses, and lawyers’ and, when Dr. Mayer refused, did not provide financial assistance.”²² One major outcome of this gathering was Nixon’s promise to start a food program (either food stamps or commodities) in every county without one.²³ This did not go as far as welfare advocates demanded but represented a real win in nationalizing access to food assistance.

The 1973 amendments to the Food Stamp Act went a step further, requiring operation of an FSP in every county. This changeover, a government report noted, was due to the “greater overall appeal, adequacy, and efficiency” of food stamps, ending a separate network of food for the poor.²⁴ By 1975, 100 percent of the population would have access to food stamps. As [Figure 1](#) illustrates, national implementation of food stamps signaled the end for direct commodity distribution.²⁵ In all areas, stamps to be exchanged in grocery stores replaced the stigmatizing direct distribution of surplus commodities.

The ongoing advocacy of the 1960s impacted food stamp politics in another way, by helping pull together diverse constituencies into the hunger lobby. Welfare and civil rights groups, farm state representatives, and farm interests were key players in this group. They were joined by new, more liberal, members of Congress who forged ties with a growing network of

²² James M. Naughton, “White House Food and Health Parley in Trouble,” *New York Times*, 14 Sept. 1969.

²³ Jack Rosenthal, “6 Hunger Parley Delegates Rebuked,” *New York Times*, 5 Dec. 1969, 25. There were 307 counties with no food program, either commodities or food stamps, in December 1969.

²⁴ US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Background on the Termination of the Food (Commodity) Distribution Program for Needy Families and Individuals*, by Joe Richardson, 73-195ED (1973), 1.

²⁵ Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, “Food Stamp Program (in Accordance with S. Res. 58),” S. Misc. Doc. 54-735, at 7 (1975). While this program never entirely disappeared, by 1976 less than 80,000 people received commodities, mostly on reservations or in trust territories where direct distribution was preferred to the FSP. See Michael Lipsky and Marc A. Thibodeau, “Domestic Food Policy in the United States,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 15, 2 (Summer 1990), 319–39, 322.

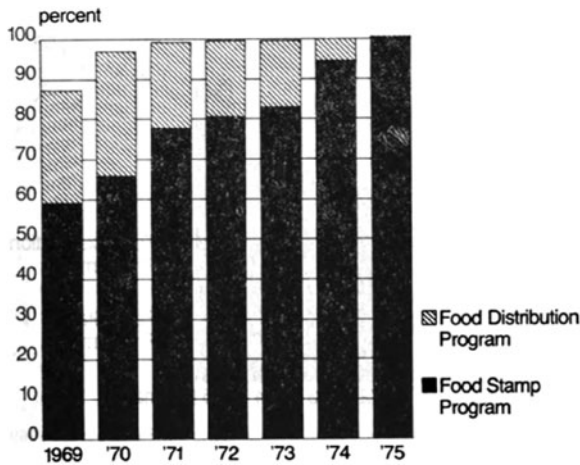


Figure 1. Percentage of population in areas served by food assistance programs.

antihunger-focussed think tanks and advocacy groups. Together, this coalition could set the agenda on expansive food assistance programs, including food stamps.

Key in this coalition was the relationship between rural and urban representatives in Congress. Food stamps, coming out of agricultural surplus in the 1930s, were enacted as part of the farm bill. In bargaining around this bill, the farm bloc needed urban legislators to vote for farm supports, while food stamp advocates needed farm support to pass legislation.²⁶ The 1971 food stamp amendments expanded program reach and solidified the program's relation to the farm bill. In extending food stamps for three more years, Congress timed the program's reauthorization with the farm bill reauthorization in 1974. Maintaining this link ensured that food welfare programs had bargaining power in Congress. Legislators succeeded again with the 1977 Agricultural Act to keep food welfare on the same cycle.²⁷ Keeping the FSP on the same authorization cycle as the rest of the farm bill ensured its passage each year as it had become a key chip in compromises made between rural and urban Congressional interests. Attached to the farm bill, it was highly unlikely Congress would fail to reauthorize food stamps.

²⁶ Sam Rosenfeld, "Fed by Reform: Congressional Politics, Partisan Change, and the Food Stamp Program, 1961–1981," *Journal of Policy History*, 22, 4 (2010), 474–507, 475.

²⁷ George McGovern, Robert Dole, and Hubert Humphrey to "Dear Colleagues," 23 May 1977; folder "FS House-Senate Conf. 1977," Box 4, Records of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition, Food Stamps, Records of the US Senate Record Group 46, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

A second change in 1973 contributed to program growth over the next four years. Congress, with surprisingly little debate, removed the ceiling on permissible spending and provided open-ended budget authority for the FSP.²⁸ Up to this point, there had been an appropriation cap on the program, meaning that more people could enroll than the program had funds to support. In reality, people were very rarely turned away from the FSP owing to a lack of program funding. Whenever the program neared its budget cap, Congress passed supplemental appropriations to close the funding gap. However, funds to meet need beyond what was originally authorized were never guaranteed. As a result of removing the cap, beginning in 1974, Congress no longer had the discretion to decide how much to spend on the food stamp program. Consequently, “the appropriations committees were obliged to provide funds adequate to ensure that all eligible households received their full allotment for food assistance.”²⁹ Under entitlement budgeting, which was in effect between in the financial years 1974 and 1977, food stamp expenditures grew 90 percent, from just under \$3 billion to almost \$5.5 billion annually. As Ronald King in his analysis of the budget politics of food stamps argues, the move to entitlement budgeting by Congress can be explained by a changed political climate “reflecting a conscious campaign by nutrition advocates.”³⁰ Open-ended budget authority expanded the reach of the FSP, representing a key gain for antihunger advocates.

Congressional reforms also facilitated growth in the FSP. Following Watergate, more reform-minded politicians were elected. This large Democratic majority pushed for procedural changes that created major turnover in the composition and leadership of the committee system, transforming agriculture and appropriations committees.³¹ The more liberal wing of the Democratic Party made gains over conservative southern representatives who had long served as chairs of agricultural and appropriations committees. Joining the Senate Agriculture Committee in 1970, Tom Foley (D-WA) assumed the chairmanship just five years later thanks to reforms that minimized the importance of seniority, disadvantaging long-serving southern Democrats who had held important chair positions for decades.³² Liberal and urban representatives were able to influence the shape of food stamps as they took up key positions on the agriculture committees.³³

²⁸ Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, “Farm Program – Food Supply: Studies and Data on the Farm Program,” S. Rep. No. 98-351, at 25–26 (1983); Maney, *Still Hungry*, 117, 124; King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 57. ²⁹ King, 65. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43. ³¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

³² Rosenfeld, 475–76. See also Bertram, “Democratic Divisions in the 1960s,” 584. These committees were key in the direction and funding of public assistance programs.

³³ King, 64.

In addition, increasing voices for poor consumers brought attention to the growing need for food assistance in a challenging economy. These voices included the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, state and local welfare administrators who liked the federalized nature of food welfare programs, and a growing think tank network. Groups like the Food Research Action Center (FRAC) and the Community Nutrition Institute (CNI) kept hunger in the news and used the court system to ensure that people received benefits to which they were legally entitled. Along with members of the poor who advocated for expanding public food assistance, these groups made up the hunger lobby.

Compounded with entitlement budgeting, a flagging domestic economy guaranteed growth in public food welfare expenditures. Food inflation hit 18 percent in 1973, accompanied by rising unemployment. Between 1974 and 1975, unemployment rose from 5.5 to 8.9 percent.³⁴ Many Americans struggled to maintain their standard of living in these changing economic conditions. When families fell behind, an increasing number turned to public food assistance. In New York City, more people applied for food stamps as inflation pushed up the cost of food. The *New York Times* ran the story “Food Stamp Applications Are Rising with the Prices,” describing how the Department of Social Welfare reported a sharp increase in non-public-assistance food stamp applications during the summer of 1973. During the month of May, the department received four hundred to five hundred applications per week. By July, this had grown to six hundred to eight hundred per week.³⁵

High unemployment coupled with declining (and even, briefly, negative) wage growth made it impossible to keep up with rising food prices (see [Figure 2](#)).³⁶ Food inflation during 1973 was particularly high. The annualized figures put the peak at over 18 percent, but this hides even greater month-to-month changes, with food price inflation of almost 21 percent from January to

³⁴ Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 81–82.

³⁵ Judith Cummings, “Food Stamp Applications Are Rising with the Prices,” *New York Times*, 16 Aug. 1973, 42.

³⁶ Annual average wage growth is calculated from annual wage data collected by the Current Population Survey (CPS). I calculated the year-on-year percent change of the average annual wage based on the average annual income of all employees. Annualized unemployment rates are from Labor Force Statistics from the CPS, collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Food price inflation is a measure of the annual percent change in food costs, from December to December. Data is drawn from “CPS Population and Per Capita Money Income, All Races: 1967 to 2018,” US Bureau of the Census, at www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/tables/time-series/historical-income-people/po1ar.xls, accessed 10 Sept. 2019; “Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population, 1940s to Date,” US Bureau of Labor Statistics, at www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaato1.pdf, accessed 10 Sept. 2019; “Food Inflation in the United States, 1968–2019,” US Inflation Calculator, at www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/food-inflation-in-the-united-states, accessed 10 Sept. 2019.

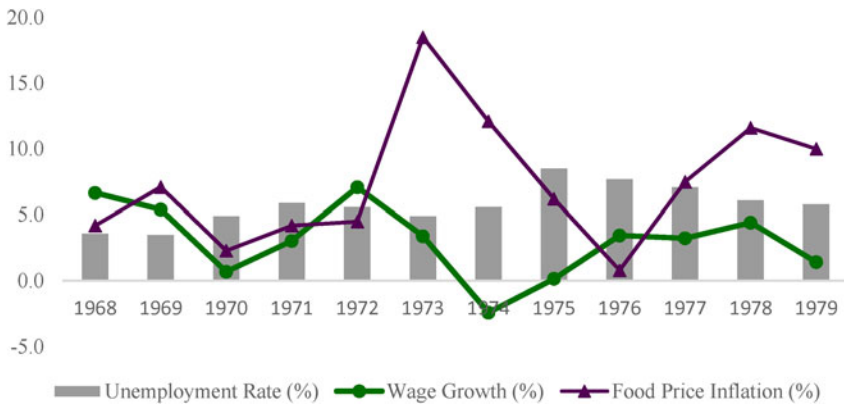


Figure 2. Unemployment, wages, and food price inflation, 1968–78.

June.³⁷ Throughout the 1970s, the challenging economy provided antihunger legislators the chance to solidify the political position of food programs. Food welfare, and particularly food stamps, became the centerpiece of efforts to establish a uniform social safety net and a de facto welfare floor, especially after the failures of Nixon’s proposal for universal basic income, the Family Assistance Plan (FAP).³⁸ To political scientist Ronald King, the expansion of food stamps demonstrates a “triumph,” with the federal government responsible for assisting those who could not afford to purchase enough to eat.³⁹ Public spending for food assistance appeared, for a moment, to be an entrenched piece of welfare spending and indicative of a public commitment to providing for the hungry with a broad understanding of need. But counterintuitively, this period marked the beginning of the undoing of federal responsibility to provide food welfare.

LIMITS ON PROGRAM GROWTH: AUSTERITY MEASURES

While food assistance programs grew at a meteoric rate during the 1970s, this was a pivotal decade when fissures emerged in the understanding of the nature and extent of state responsibility for relief from hunger. By 1975, food stamps had become a symbol of a bloated welfare program, a part of the larger

³⁷ Maurice MacDonald, “Food Stamps: An Analytical History,” *Social Service Review*, 51, 4 (1977), 642–58, 652.

³⁸ Maney, *Still Hungry*, 117.

³⁹ One account of food program growth can be found in King, 46: “The story regarding the creation of the food stamp program in the early 1960s, its rapid growth over the next decade, and its establishment as a central component in the repertoire of the US welfare state has been told often, usually from the perspective of triumph of social justice over entrenched opposition and public apathy.”

pushback to 1960s welfare expansionism, and linked to increasingly racialized depictions of welfare recipients in the media. At the national level, however, public officials were careful to avoid direct mention of race and to focus instead on budget politics. Shortly after assuming the presidency following Richard Nixon's resignation, President Gerald Ford described the food stamp program as yet "another massive, multibillion-dollar program, almost uncontrolled and fully supported by Federal taxpayers."⁴⁰ As food program costs expanded during the decade, politicians looked for ways to limit program growth. Ford's description highlights a marked shift in the way politicians and the public thought about food stamps. Ford's, and later Jimmy Carter's, concern with growing spending in food welfare led both Presidents to implement austerity measures in the food stamp program. So began the unraveling of the tenuous consensus on food welfare as the Ford and Carter administrations sought to place boundaries around public responsibility.

President Ford made two failed efforts at introducing austerity measures into the FSP, first by advocating to increase the purchase price and second through attempts at substantial rule changes in the program, bypassing Congress. While neither was successful, both proposals represented an important shift in the framing of the food stamp program among nationally prominent politicians and impacted the way the public perceived food stamps. Instead of a sign of positive government assistance, food stamps became increasingly associated with federal overreach.

Rising inflation and unemployment left increasing numbers of Americans without access to adequate food, leading to rapid growth in food stamp rolls. Forecasts had not predicted that poor economic conditions would bring so many new participants into the FSP, part of a longer history of consistently underestimating future program enrollments.⁴¹ In spite of these conditions, Ford proposed a measure to lower the cost of the food stamp program. According to Ford's Council of Economic Advisers, FSP costs far outweighed program benefits in terms of "value for money." They advised President Ford to restore the purchase price to 30 percent of family income, projected to create \$650 million in program savings.⁴² While experience with the

⁴⁰ Gerald Ford, Message to Congress, 27 July 1975, folder "Food Stamps (2)," Box 4, Spencer Johnson Files, Gerald R. Ford Library (hereafter Ford Library). Ford noted that food stamps had grown from \$36 million in 1964 to \$7 billion in 1975. ⁴¹ King, 67.

⁴² Memo, Dennis H. Wood to Dean Burch, Roy Ash, Ken Cole, Bill Timmons, Bill Seidman, Gary SeEVERS, "Possible Reforms in USDA Food Assistance Programs," 23 Sept. 1974, folder "Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2)," Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers; Ford Library. The purchase price had been dropped to 25% following the White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Health in 1969.

program highlighted that any purchase price was a burden to many families, budget austerity, according to the Ford administration, necessitated raising costs to participants.

Making this change was going to be an uphill battle in Congress, but Ford was determined. Goaded on by his Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, Ford ignored allies close to him who pointed out that raising the purchase price could unnecessarily raise the hackles of Democratic legislators and other powerful interest groups, such as labor. Alan Greenspan, chairman of the CEA, had been unable to attend the September meeting where it was decided to set a standard purchase price at 30 percent. Following the meeting, he cautioned Secretary Butz against raising the purchase price: "it is wrong to do this in light of the view reached at the Inflation Conference that the poor bear the major burden of inflation."⁴³ Even those who agreed with the general idea of the 30 percent purchase price realized it was unlikely to succeed in the current political climate. Ford's Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Caspar Weinberger, privately agreed with this cost-saving measure. Nevertheless, he was pessimistic about the success of the initiative, fearing that Congressional Democrats would deny them as additional "cost cutting at the expense of the poor."⁴⁴ And Weinberger was right. Ford was not able to gain any traction in Congress in support of his proposed reforms. While members of Congress agreed that the food stamp program needed reforming, they wanted to complete this in a coordinated fashion, not through piecemeal amendments.

During the summer of 1975, the Ford administration turned its attention again to reining in food stamp program spending. President Ford argued that the program had drifted away from its original intent: "What was originally designed as a program aimed at nutritional assistance to the poor and assistance to small farmers has now become in essence a program of income support."⁴⁵ By returning to more modest roots, Ford could create budget savings through the FSP.

At first, Ford tried to implement reform through Congress. On 21 October 1975, Senator Talmadge (D-GA) and Senator Buckley (R-NY) introduced the

⁴³ Memo, Alan Greenspan to Earl Butz, Dean Burch, Bill Timmons, Roy Ash, Ken Rush, Bill Seidman, "Idea for Mr. Rush's Meeting on USDA Food Programs," 30 Sept. 1974, folder "Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2)," Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers; Ford Library.

⁴⁴ Lawrence J. McAndrews, "No Time to Heal: Gerald Ford, 1974–1977," in McAndrews, *The Presidents and the Poor* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 59–77, 63.

⁴⁵ Gerald Ford, Message to Congress, 27 July 1975, Textual Files, Spencer Johnson, Box 4, folder "Food Stamps (2)," Ford Library.

administration's bill to the Senate.⁴⁶ Ford's proposed rules included a provision for a 30 percent standard purchase price and tough work registration requirements, as well as other provisions designed to shrink participation and cut costs. By January 1976 members of the Ford administration had decided that Congress was not moving fast enough, and in mid-February made public that they were planning to reform food stamps through regulatory changes instead.⁴⁷ President Ford wrote to Talmadge highlighting the need to move more quickly than Congress allowed. In the letter, he explained that "while statutory changes by the Congress would be the most desirable course of action, we can no longer afford to wait."⁴⁸ The urgency in Ford's action can perhaps be attributed to his activity on the campaign trail and needing to appear strong on welfare reform.

There was immediate pushback to Ford's proposed administrative changes. The governor of Delaware, Democrat Sherman W. Tribbitt, wrote to President Ford arguing against reform through regulation. Instead, the governor reasoned, the "solution to the Food Stamp problem cannot be achieved by rewriting federal regulations. In fact, one of the major problems in the administration of this or any other program is the constant change in federal regulations."⁴⁹ Constant rule changes made administering food stamps challenging and added costs. Further, making these changes without input from Congress was not a democratic course of action. In light of this critique, Ford's deputies needed to find a way to highlight the benefits of reforming the FSP outside Congress.

Department of Agriculture officials, including Secretary Butz and his assistant secretary, Richard Feltner, worked with US Attorney General Edward H. Levi to create talking points for the President making the case for executive rule changes. Levi emphasized the need for change in the FSP due to Congressional inaction. But this had to be framed within a "positive rationale" for the necessity of changes, "both in terms of the truly needy people who are denied the benefits that they deserve as well as budgetary considerations."⁵⁰ This quote is especially interesting as it highlights that instead of focussing

⁴⁶ US Congress, Senate, *To Reform the Food Stamp Act of 1964 by Improving the Provisions Relating to Eligibility...*, S. Res. 2537, 94th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in Senate 21 Oct. 1976.

⁴⁷ Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 89.
⁴⁸ Letter, Gerald Ford to Herman Talmadge, 19 Feb. 1976, Senate Papers—Legislative Relations 1969–1996; Series 2, Box 18, Folder 5, "Committee on Agriculture + Forestry—Food Stamps, 1976," Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

⁴⁹ Letter, Sherman W. Tribbitt to Gerald Ford, 11 March 1976, folder "WE 10-4 Executive," White House Central Files, Ford Library.

⁵⁰ Jim Cannon, "Meeting Outline May 27, 1976, 3:30 pm, Cabinet Room," folder "WE 10-4 Executive," White House Central Files, Ford Library.

solely on whether benefits were reaching all of those in need and eligible, the cost of these benefits was a factor, too. It also demonstrates that officials in the Ford administration worried about seeming to deny benefits to someone “deserv[ing]” of them. While the difficult fiscal climate of 1970s stagflation became an added factor in food stamp budgeting, Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs Jim Cannon believed that measures of need should inform the program budget as well.

In spite of these efforts by Ford and his administrators, the antihunger coalition stopped executive attempts at reform. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) led the effort to file a lawsuit against the USDA, citing the proposed FSP regulatory guidelines as unlawful. Joining FRAC in the suit were twenty-six state attorneys general along with labor, civil rights, civic, and religious groups.⁵¹ The judge sided with FRAC, stating that the government had “exceeded its authority” in issuing regulations to reform the program, killing the regulations for the remainder of 1976 until they could go through Congress.⁵² In both attempts, to raise the purchase price and reform through regulation, the Ford administration wanted to change the structure and function of food stamps beyond the realm of what was acceptable as judged by the courts and in the eyes of the antihunger lobby. But these were only temporary setbacks.

Efforts to change public food welfare in the 1970s were not an attempt to back away altogether from public food provision, but to put boundaries around public responsibility. Ford failed to enact his changes to food stamps, but his efforts shaped the FSP in other ways. Ford drew on a longer history of local officials, particularly from the South, who opposed welfare by demonizing recipients, most often poor black Americans.⁵³ These unsuccessful proposals to cut program spending and limit eligibility at the national level shifted the public’s perception of the food stamp program, contributing to the changing language used to describe food stamps on the national stage.

President Ford was not alone in calling for food stamp reform. California governor Ronald Reagan asserted that the FSP had moved so far away from its original intention as to be unrecognizable. In his “Blueprint for National Welfare Reform,” Reagan described food stamp regulations as being much

⁵¹ Nancy Hicks, “26 States and 3 Cities Sue to Enjoin Food Stamp Cuts,” *New York Times*, 27 May 1976, 51.

⁵² A.P., “Judge Delays Cutbacks,” *Courier-Journal* (Louisville), 19 June 1976, A2.

⁵³ Southern members of Congress had a long-standing concern that any assistance, whether cash or in kind, would undercut the low-wage labor system in the South, particularly in the agricultural sector. See, for example, the interview in *Harvest of Shame* with the president of the American Farm Bureau Federation advocating that any work, even just for a few days per year, was better than none. *Harvest of Shame*, produced by David Lowe, featuring Edward R. Murrow, aired 25 Nov. 1960 on CBS.

more lax than other welfare programs, leading students, striking workers, and families with high incomes (up to \$10,000) to receive more than their fair share.⁵⁴ Reagan sent a copy of this report to President Ford, arguing that the “incredible laxity in federal food stamp requirements” needed to be addressed at the national level. Further, Reagan echoed Ford in claiming that the program had far outgrown its original purpose. The program, Reagan noted, was founded on “the assumption of the necessity to distribute *food surpluses*,” but these surpluses “no longer exist and probably never will again.”⁵⁵ Ford’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) agreed with this assessment. According to the CEA, “Under existing legislation and current operating practices, USDA food assistance (welfare) programs have become excessively expensive in relation to the net additional nutritional benefits delivered to recipients.”⁵⁶ In short, food stamps were not delivering enough for the public investment they required, a repudiation of the dynamics of expansion built into the revised FSP.

Rhetoric on the national stage shifted to reflect these changing perceptions. Food stamps transformed from having “error rates” to being sites of widespread waste, fraud, and abuse, indicating changing opinions about the deservingness of food welfare recipients, and hence the proper role for public food provision. In the early 1970s, many observers described problems in the FSP as administrative shortcomings. Dubbed “error rates,” local or national administrators took the fall for any issues with the program. News clippings from the *Baltimore Sun* in December 1973 discussed the food stamp program’s error rate. One headline ran, “Group Doubts Error Rate in Welfare.” Another *Sun* headline read, “Trim Welfare Errors, [Maryland governor] Mandel Warns.”⁵⁷ Even when critiquing the program, the article’s author used the more neutral language of error rates. Referring to the error rate was not just the practice in Baltimore; Ford’s

⁵⁴ Notably there is not a single mention of race in this report. Ronald Reagan, “California’s Blueprint for National Welfare Reform: Proposals for the Nation’s Food Stamp and Aid to Families with Dependent Children Programs,” Sept. 1974, Sacramento, CA, i, ix, folder “Welfare Reform – Ronald Reagan Letter and Report,” Box 13, Richard B. Cheney Files, Ford Library, digitized at www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561608.pdf.

⁵⁵ Digitized letter, Governor Ronald Reagan to President Gerald R. Ford, “Welfare Reform,” 20 Dec. 1974, folder “Welfare Reform – Ronald Reagan Letter and Report,” Box 13, Richard B. Cheney Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, at www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561608.pdf, original emphasis.

⁵⁶ Memo, Dennis H. Wood to Dean Burch, Roy Ash, Ken Cole, Bill Timmons, Bill Seidman, and Gary Seevers, “Possible Reforms in USDA Food Assistance Programs,” 23 Sept. 1974, folder “Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2),” Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers, Ford Library.

⁵⁷ “Trim Welfare Errors, Mandel Warns,” *The Sun*, 5 Dec. 1973, n.p.; and Sharon Dickerson, “Group Doubts Error Rate in Welfare,” *Evening Sun*, 1 Dec. 1973, n.p., folder “Welfare 1973 December,” Box 67, Series 75, Record Group 48, Department of Housing and Community Development, Baltimore City Archives.

Council of Economic Advisers used this formulation, too, when discussing the food stamp program – “audits reveal high error rate (certifying ineligible and excessive bonus payments).”⁵⁸ In each of these cases, it was not individual food stamp recipients who were at fault. Instead, the problems stemmed from issues in program administration.

However, in many states, there had been no consensus on food assistance. Many officials in the South characterized hunger, and poverty more generally, as a result of individual failings. State-level backlash to welfare spending, both in cash assistance to poor families and in food stamps, made clear that increasing work, not welfare, was the answer. By 1960, twenty-six states, primarily in the South and Southwest, had included work requirements and “suitable-home” provisions to restrict eligibility for Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), while a few state officials went further, setting a cap on maximum payments far below the national poverty line.⁵⁹ Most states cutting ADC welfare rolls had a large agribusiness sector, lower than average per capita income, and an above average share of welfare cases for black families.⁶⁰ Indeed, welfare backlashes contained clearly racial components.

Opposition to food stamp distribution drew upon economic and racial rationales. Big agribusiness in particular pushed back against income supplements. The sector relied on low-wage workers with limited mobility, especially as the sharecropping system faded by the 1950s. This meant that agribusiness was also opposed to the near-cash substitute, food stamps. Farm interests required large reserves of contingent labor to meet their planting and harvesting needs. Any outside financial support risked the stability of this labor pool.

Later in the decade, hunger tours of the South uncovered massive resistance on the part of southern officials on economic grounds and from a “racially coded conception of the poverty problem.”⁶¹ Once mechanization reduced the need for plantation labor, rather than providing food aid, many rural southern locales sought to drive black residents – no longer economically vital, and newly politically threatening as potential voters – out of the region by denying assistance.⁶² Southern officials’ narratives of undeserving

⁵⁸ Memo, Dennis H. Wood to Dean Burch, Roy Ash, Ken Cole, Bill Timmons, Bill Seidman, and Gary SeEVERS, “Possible Reforms in USDA Food Assistance Programs,” 23 Sept. 1974, folder “Alan Greenspan Files: Food (2),” Box 45, Council of Economic Advisers, Ford Library.

⁵⁹ Ellen Reese, *Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015), 40–45. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 63–66.

⁶¹ David Ballantyne, “‘A Public Problem ... Rather than a Question of Social Welfare’: Ernest F. Hollings and the Politics of Hunger,” *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 8, 1 (2015), 75–98, 86.

⁶² Greta de Jong, *You Can’t Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 33.

black welfare recipients, particularly unwed black mothers who supposedly had more children to receive greater benefits, rhetorically constructed the idea of the “welfare queen.”⁶³ Arguments against both AFDC and food stamps had become increasingly racialized by the 1970s in national-level debates as well.

The terminology around food stamps at the national level had shifted abruptly by the mid-1970s: the program was panned as rife with waste and abuse, with reports blaming food stamp recipients for the majority of these ills. This bad publicity contributed to negative attitudes about food stamps. Jeffrey Berry, in his legislative history of the FSP, notes that “the press, which had been the hunger lobby’s most potent resource, now became a powerful weapon in the hands of the opposition.”⁶⁴ Turning the blame away from the structure of the program onto individuals created an opening for attacks on food stamps.

The shifting public opinion around the FSP, represented in changing language, is indicative not just of the “southernization” of national politics, but also of the ebb and flow of public interest across the policy cycle. First, people are most passionate about public policy during its adoption phase. During the implementation phase, attention shifts to “devil-in-the-details” points like administration and efficiency. Moving past the enactment/adoption phase also changed the way news organizations covered food stamps. As King notes, regular program functions “are not especially newsworthy.”⁶⁵ Instead, the more exciting headlines of waste and fraud make it into the press. Third, as the program grew with entitlement budgeting, more people saw recipients in the grocery store using stamps. This was a natural consequence of program growth. However, middle-class shoppers might also have witnessed recipients purchasing what they defined as “luxury” goods, unbefitting a food stamp recipient, or, even worse, a waste of taxpayer money.⁶⁶ Lastly, the mid-1970s economic decline had led to leaner state budgets, forcing conversations about public spending across the economy.⁶⁷ However, entitlement budgeting in the food stamp program nationally between 1974 and 1977 meant that the program was immune from the politics of welfare budgeting, but not from the *rhetoric* around these programs.

Beginning in March 1975, local news outlets picked up increasing numbers of stories on food stamp fraud. The *Pittsburgh Press* ran, “One-Fourth Get Food Stamps Illegally, U.S. Survey Hints,” while the *San Diego Union*

⁶³ Reese, 85.

⁶⁵ King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 64.

⁶⁷ LeeAnn B. Lands, “Lobbying for Welfare in a Deep South State Legislature in the 1970s,” *Journal of Southern History*, 84, 3 (2018), 652–96, 668.

⁶⁴ Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 82.
⁶⁶ Ibid.

lamented program mismanagement in the article “Fiscal Albatross: Food Stamp Waste Escalates.”⁶⁸ By the end of the year, *Newsweek* ran “Food Stamp Furor” on mismanagement and other problems in the FSP. The article’s author reported that “charges of abuse and fraud have also increased, and food stamps, as the most visible form of public aid, have incurred the special wrath of the hard-pressed middle class.”⁶⁹ In part, the economic squeeze on everyone was likely to blame for increased scrutiny. While this part of the analysis was less negative than the two local news stories, the top of the *Newsweek* piece highlighted all the ways families with relatively high incomes could qualify for the food stamp program. Further, this story ran during the week of key food stamp committee hearings where Ford’s Cabinet members took an increasingly oppositional stance to the FSP. Discussions of fraud and abuse began to replace the more value-neutral language of error rates.

One particularly powerful critic of the FSP was William Simon, Ford’s Treasury Secretary. In testimony before the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, he described all the ways “chiselers and con artists” could take advantage of lax procedures of the FSP, which, he said, “by its very nature, is prone to abuse.”⁷⁰ This shift in language signaled a new approach to food stamps. If the program was rife with fraud and abuse, then the nation had an obligation to tighten up the program and ensure that only those truly in need received benefits. A constituent letter to Senator Dole echoed these concerns. The anonymous writer asked for separate FSP checkout lines in grocery stores. This would “eliminate the close contact between those who approach the checkout counter with a baby on one hip, three more hanging on the dress tail, a cigarette in the mouth and a handful of food stamps.”⁷¹ These representations gave credence to narrowing ideas

⁶⁸ “One-Fourth,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 2 March 1975, n.p.; “Fiscal Albatross,” *San Diego Union*, 9 March 1975, WE 10-4 Executive, White House Central Files, Ford Library.

⁶⁹ “Food Stamp Furor,” *Newsweek*, 20 Oct. 1975, n.p., folder “WE 27 Executive,” White House Central Files; Ford Library. The copy of this article in the Ford Library has “The President Has Seen” stamped across the top in red block letters.

⁷⁰ Over fifty pages of Secretary of the Treasury William Simon’s testimony addressed food stamp fraud, including an annex of excerpts from selected fraud cases. These thirty hand-selected examples demonstrated the myriad ways the program could be abused. See Annex to William E. Simon, Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, 21 Oct. 1975, folder “Welfare (1),” Box 12, Spencer Johnson Files; Ford Library, original emphasis.

⁷¹ Letter, anonymous to Robert J. Dole, 28 Oct. 1975, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers—Constituent Relations, 1969–1996, Series 4, Folder 11, “Subject—Agriculture, Food Stamps, 1975–1976,” Box 229, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas.

about the scope of public provision as it framed a large subset of program participants as undeserving cheats.

The food stamp program represents just one piece of the larger conversation discrediting welfare spending in the early 1970s. The arguments that led to the failure of a true income support program (FAP) and shrinking of state cash assistance (AFDC) were intimately connected to debates over food stamps.⁷² But while FAP failed and legislators cut AFDC benefits, entitlement budgeting rules shielded food stamps from cuts. However, fierce battles over welfare spending did impact public and political opinion. The FSP was subject to the same political rhetoric as other welfare programs in the early to mid-1970s, but the rhetoric could not be translated into policy action without legislative change. Ford and his administration's attempts to rein in the FSP became seen as a responsible answer to a program that had grown out of control. As goodwill for food assistance retreated, politicians were able to inject austerity measures across the portfolio of food welfare programs.

When Jimmy Carter defeated Ford in the 1976 election, he came into the White House with a different perspective on food stamp reform. For Carter, Ford's attempts at outright cuts in food welfare programs served as a cautionary tale. Ford had no qualms about cutting food assistance, even over concerns from his own advisers, whereas Carter proposed a more moderate approach. Carter was attentive to containing costs in food welfare programs. He was a fan of "zero-cost" budgeting, meaning that any change in policy needed to be revenue-neutral.⁷³ While Carter was committed to balancing the budget, his administration decided to avoid making cuts that would have them perceived as removing benefits at any cost to make savings.

Carter's election is important as he served as the first "New South" Democrat in the White House. "New South" Democrats distanced themselves from the overtly racial politics of past southern Democrats and instead focussed on government efficiency and economic development.⁷⁴ Some had embraced antihunger advocacy by the late 1960s, such as South Carolina Democrat Ernest F. Hollings, who linked food welfare to an economic, not social, problem, noting that someone who is fed is more productive. Feeding people, in short, was fiscally conservative.⁷⁵ Carter fits this mold, with his fiscal conservatism of zero-cost budgeting, while maintaining attention to the hunger problem, at least from an economic perspective.

⁷² See Reese; and Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), on the demise of FAP and benefit cuts to AFDC.

⁷³ See Chappell, *The War on Welfare*, 186-187.

⁷⁴ Lands, 670 n. 4.

⁷⁵ Ballantyne, "A Public Problem," 83-84.

With this different frame in mind, the Carter administration worked to enact a change that antihunger activists had been pushing for since passage of the Food Stamp Act in 1964: ending the purchase requirement for all program participants. Earlier in the decade, the purchase price was phased out for many people with incomes below thirty dollars per month, but the purchase price kept many with incomes over thirty dollars from participating.⁷⁶ In 1977, Carter declared his intent to end the purchase requirement (dubbed EPR) in the FSP. This change appeared to be an expansive shift. The poorest citizens with little cash on hand to purchase stamps could finally benefit from the program.⁷⁷ However, even ending the purchase price was rooted in austerity politics, creating boundaries around public responsibility. In exchange for EPR, 1977 legislation cut eligibility to millions and reinstated spending caps, ones that in retrospect Congress set unreasonably low.⁷⁸ Ending the purchase requirement opened the food stamp program to lower-income families and individuals but did so at the cost of families just over the poverty line.

The administration bill, submitted to Congress on 5 April 1977, included the provision to end the purchase price.⁷⁹ This change alone was forecast to increase FSP enrollments significantly. To balance out the cost of providing stamps to an estimated two million more people, the bill lowered benefits for many, going so far as to make some current recipients ineligible for food stamps.⁸⁰ The income eligibility level dropped to the poverty line, lowering the income ceiling by a thousand dollars for an individual to \$5,850, and for a family of four from \$14,000 down to \$9,500. This change made 1.4 million people ineligible (8.6 percent of program participants), and somewhere between 3.4 and 4.8 million had their benefits decreased (30 percent, or 39 percent of participants).⁸¹ Carter's advisers reassured him that food stamp costs would hold steady at \$5.4 billion when the purchase price was phased out with these changes to program operations. Only by limiting eligibility could Carter justify ending the purchase requirement.

In addition to limiting eligibility, ending the purchase requirement effectively lowered food stamp benefits. Through the purchase price, families had

⁷⁶ US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *How the Food Stamp Program Works: A Resource Paper*, by Kathryn Michelman and Joe Richardson, 74-232ED (1975), 15.

⁷⁷ "A Short History of SNAP," at www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap, accessed 21 March 2014.

⁷⁸ King, *Budgeting Entitlements*, 67; Maney, *Still Hungry*, 131.

⁷⁹ US Congress, House, *To Reform the Food Stamp Act of 1964 ...*, HR 6052, 95th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House 5 April 1977.

⁸⁰ Nancy Hicks, "Carter Asks End to Requirement That Poor Pay for Food Stamps," *New York Times*, 6 April 1977, 1.

⁸¹ George McGovern, "1977 Food Stamp Bill," n.d., folder "S. 275 Senate Floor," Box 4, Records of the US Senate, Record Group 46, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

been required to pay their “normal” monthly expenditures for food up-front. With this compulsion gone, EPR assumed that families would still use this cash for food, but the reality was that many spent this on more pressing needs. The rising costs of shelter, medical care, and utilities all outpaced inflation. Extra cash went toward these areas instead of toward food purchases.⁸² While framed as an expansionary measure, EPR represented another limit to the scope of public food aid.

Tied in with debates about ending the purchase requirement were changes in budget rules. If Carter was serious about ending the purchase requirement, Representative Dawson Mathis (D-GA) argued that this needed to be paired with program spending caps. According to Mathis, spending caps would ensure that Congress, not program administrators and regulatory writers in the USDA, could control program expenditures and smooth program functions.⁸³

The Senate Select Committee on Nutrition made two arguments against capping food stamps. First, other programs in the farm bill, including most agricultural subsidies, were not similarly capped, functioning instead as true entitlements. Why categorize food stamps differently? Second, they contended that the FSP would no longer respond naturally to changes in the macroeconomy. Instead, Congress would have to step in and pass new appropriations.⁸⁴ The committee played out a scenario where food stamps would not be able to serve everyone eligible:

What would happen if unemployment again rose and the food stamp rolls swelled? For every 1% increase in the unemployment rate food stamp participation increases 500,000–750,000. There is no commodity program in place any longer to serve as a back-up ... If a cap is legislated, the administration could not simply come to the Congress for a supplemental appropriation as they do now. The authorization would also have to be amended and that could not be done for the present fiscal year due to the procedure of the Budget Act. The food stamp program is a counter-cyclical program that is immediately responsive to changes in economic conditions. The cap would completely destroy that feature of the program.⁸⁵

Despite these concerns, the House Agriculture Committee majority accepted Mathis’s proposal to cap expenditures. As Ronald King notes, “it represented the primacy of fiscal over substantive provisions.”⁸⁶ Congress set the cap at \$5.8 billion for the financial year 1978, slightly above administration estimates.

⁸² Beth Osborne Daponte and Shannon Bade, “How the Private Food Assistance Network Evolved: Interactions between Private Responses to Hunger,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 35, 4 (Dec. 2006), 668–90, 675. ⁸³ King, 81. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁵ Memo, Kathleen Bishop and Marshall Matz to George McGovern, “Food Stamps – Title XII,” 1 Aug. 1977, folder “FS House-Senate Conf 1977,” Box 4, Records of the US Senate, Record Group 46, National Archives Building, Washington, DC, original emphasis.

⁸⁶ King, 83.

Instead of smoothing functions, budget caps made regular program operation precarious, giving power to those enforcing delays and creating, as King describes, an “opportunity for brinksmanship.”⁸⁷ Estimates throughout the 1970s minimized forecasted need in spite of increasing macroeconomic volatility. The 1977 Food Stamp Act appropriated \$6.2 billion per year for the financial years 1980 and 1981, but this was not enough to meet growing demand during the recession coupled with rising food costs. Instead of automatically increasing spending to meet need, “essential welfare benefits became hostage to non-welfare purposes . . . The politics of ensuring a minimal diet to the deserving poor households was excessively complicated and food stamp allotments were sometimes inappropriately threatened.”⁸⁸ The budget politics of uncapping and capping food stamp authorizations demonstrates the increasingly fragile nature of the food welfare and farm accord by the late 1970s.

In the absence of program reform allowing for appropriations up to the level of need, the FSP once again required supplemental appropriations to keep pace with growing demand.⁸⁹ While Congress had been willing to pass supplemental appropriations before the era of FSP entitlement budgeting, would this remain the case with the increasingly negative perception of the program, especially when much of this discussion tied in directly to budget politics? Spending caps had seemed politically necessary to regain control over the program budget, but they also signaled a change in thinking about welfare spending in national-level debates. Food stamp expenditures once again became subject to what was politically possible, framed increasingly in terms of the available budget.

Looking solely at increased spending and participation in the FSP during the 1970s, it can appear that Nixon, Ford, and Carter were willing partners in plans to eradicate domestic hunger. However, this narrative of program growth hides a story of fierce contestation in the food stamp program. Battles over the scope and purpose of food stamps took place in Congress, but also outside the legislative process. Debates over food welfare, however hidden, had lasting impacts. Discussing the food stamp program in terms of “value for money” while dismissing need in the face of budget austerity helped politicians reframe the program not as a national entitlement, but more narrowly as assistance for the deserving. Further, the lexical shift from error rates to fraud and abuse, coupled with increasingly racialized depictions of FSP beneficiaries, demonstrates how new ways of thinking about food stamps took hold by the mid-1970s. Newly entrenched ideas and language transformed public food provision from a positive example of welfare spending to one of massive federal overreach, rife with fraud and abuse. In the emerging competition between demands for food program expansion and budget austerity, policies throughout the 1970s shifted toward austerity.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁹ Maney, *Still Hungry*, 134.

RONALD REAGAN AND THE POLITICS OF DISENTITLEMENT

The politics of austerity gave way to disenfranchisement, eliminating the notion of a basic right to federal food welfare. Twenty-one million participated in the food stamp program in 1980, meaning that close to one American in ten received food stamps.⁹⁰ These numbers were too high for the newly elected President, Ronald Reagan. In a February 1981 joint address to Congress, Reagan promised that “the food stamp program will be restored to its original purpose, to assist those without resources to purchase sufficient nutritional food.” This, he went on, could be done while cutting costs by “removing from eligibility those who are not in real need or who are abusing the program.”⁹¹ As his campaign tales about welfare queens and “strapping young bucks” using food stamps to buy “T-bone steaks” highlighted, there were clear racial dimensions to the imagined “undeserving” welfare recipient.⁹² For the FSP, the Reagan administration justified cutting spending because, in its current form, too many people with sufficient resources were currently eligible for food stamps. In targeting benefits more tightly, food stamps would provide better return on public money by helping only those who truly needed assistance. This marks a continuity with the earlier period of administration efforts to shrink the program. But rather than the fiscal feasibility of providing food stamps, it is solely the deservingness of the recipients that is in question. Limits on public food welfare were no longer due to limits of the macroeconomy, which had characterized the austerity of the Ford and, to a lesser degree, Carter administrations.

To understand this moment, it is necessary to step back and look at intellectual currents in the Republican Party and on the political right. Conservative politicians of the 1980s preached individual responsibility while also extolling the virtues of voluntary and charitable effort. In a different speech, Reagan explained, “the truth is we’ve let government take away many things we once considered were really ours to do voluntarily.”⁹³ In this context, the framing of hunger transformed from a national problem requiring robust public programs to a temporary emergency, ideal for private and charitable interventions. In the case where tighter FSP rules

⁹⁰ USDA, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs,” at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAPsummary-1.pdf>.

⁹¹ Ronald Reagan, “Message to the Congress Transmitting the Proposed Package on the Program for Economic Recovery,” 18 Feb. 1981, The American Presidency Project at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/246570, quoted in King, 116.

⁹² This language comes from a Florida rally for Reagan’s unsuccessful bid for the 1976 Republican presidential nomination. See Dan Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963–1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 64.

⁹³ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery,” 24 Sept. 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, at www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/92481d.

denied benefits to someone who really needed the help, private food assistance would fill the gaps. The politics of disentitlement went beyond austerity politics. According to this new approach, the difference from lost public funds was to be made up by private charity, part of a larger, ideologically driven project delegitimizing a right to public food assistance and government intervention more generally. Nevertheless, minimizing the hunger problem belied the reality of increasing need at a structural and systemic level.

The Reagan administration used the budget as a tool to disentitle food welfare recipients. Congress did not enact cuts through reform on a program-by-program basis, but instead reformed welfare at the Reagan administration's behest through the budget. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981 served as the key mechanism to enact cuts in welfare expenditures. OBRA slashed federal antipoverty funds and restricted eligibility rules, ostensibly keeping only the "truly needy" on welfare rolls.⁹⁴ OBRA required dramatic cuts in the food stamp budget, transforming spending across scores of welfare programs overnight, to meet reduced budget targets. Cuts were carried out through technical changes which flew under the radar of most, but not the individuals who were no longer entitled to food assistance. Ardith Maney noted that making these changes through the budget was "not surprising" since "White House officials did not have enough political support in Congress to reshape social programs outright through the legislative process."⁹⁵ Still, OBRA had a devastating impact on the functions of the food stamp program. Expenditures in the FSP fell from \$11.2 billion to \$10.8 billion between 1981 and 1982 while average monthly participation in the FSP declined from a peak of 22.4 million in 1981 to 21.6 million by 1983. These figures were surprising in the context of rising unemployment. Unemployment rose from 6.5 percent to over 10 percent in these two years, marking the only time food stamps have not served as a countercyclical spending measure and grown to combat recession.⁹⁶ In other words, food stamp rolls *shrank* during the 1981–2 recession.⁹⁷

Changing eligibility criteria and more punitive policies pushed millions of formerly eligible food welfare beneficiaries off the rolls. Rules outlined in OBRA tightened eligibility requirements to create cost savings in food welfare programs. The most straightforward option was to lower the income

⁹⁴ Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 242.

⁹⁵ Maney, 134.

⁹⁶ USDA, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs," at <https://fnsp-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAPsummary-1.pdf>; Mike Shedlock, "The Food Stamp Recession," *Finance.townhall.com*, at http://finance.townhall.com/columnists/mikeshedlock/2011/12/08/the_food_stamp_recession, accessed 14 April 2014.

⁹⁷ Maney, 132–36.

ceiling on eligibility. The gross income eligibility standard was set at 130 percent of the poverty line; prior to this there had been no national cutoff.⁹⁸ This change in the income eligibility standard alone was predicted to knock 400,000 households from the program, saving \$275 million – or twenty-two dollars per person per month.⁹⁹ OBRA used other tools to limit eligibility indirectly. New rules lowered the earned-income deduction and froze shelter deductions. In both cases, this meant that less income could be discounted in determining eligibility. This change increased the effective “tax” on income where small increases in a household’s income, or even no change at all, could remove household eligibility or shrink benefits substantially. Shifting eligibility rules meant that an estimated one million participants – out of 20 million total – were no longer eligible for food stamps, and many of those who remained saw absolute benefit reductions.

OBRA also put in place new rules that rigged administrative errors and delays in favor of the federal administrators, keeping food stamps out of peoples pockets. First, the USDA began prorating the initial month’s allotment if a household was not enrolled for the entire month. If a family registered on the tenth of the month instead of the first, their benefits for the first month would be cut by one-third. Next, OBRA allowed states to recoup *accidental* overpayments by cutting the value of coupons in later allotments. Previously this had been allowed in cases of fraud. But now this practice was allowed when it was *not* the fault of the recipient, such as when resulting from an administrative error.¹⁰⁰ These two punitive measures rigged the administrative complexity of the food stamp program further out of favor from recipients, even when they were not at fault for certification delays or overpayments.

OBRA also imposed harsher penalties for illegal activity. It expanded reasons for disqualification from the program to include any action that violated a state statute, and imposed tougher penalties for fraud and abuse.¹⁰¹ After three strikes, families could be permanently and irrevocably terminated from the FSP. State and federal administrators had increased power to disallow benefits while the poor would have to fight for benefit restoration in the case of being misjudged for fraud. In the balance between rights and responsibilities, harsher punishments emphasized the responsibilities of beneficiaries of food welfare programs, minimizing their related rights.

⁹⁸ Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Pub. L. 97-35, 95 Stat. 357 (1981).

⁹⁹ Food Research & Action Center, “Alert – Reagan Budget Cuts,” 19 Feb. 1981; Records of the Center for Poverty Studies, Series I, Box 6A, Folder “FS Hist/Fed Budget Cut Effects,” University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives.

¹⁰⁰ Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Pub. L. 97-35, 95 Stat. 357 (1981).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

An entitlement to food receded further with the delinking of benefit levels from inflation. OBRA created savings in the FSP by slowing the rate of growth of coupon allotments. Through 1981, benefits had been “uprated” every six months. This meant that coupon values would be adjusted to match changes in inflation twice per year.¹⁰² To create savings, Congress stretched the period between inflation indexing.¹⁰³ Food stamps would only be uprated every fifteen months until 1984, at which point they would be put back on a schedule of annual updates.¹⁰⁴ In the interim, when food prices rose due to inflation, these changes would not be reflected in increased food stamp values for long periods of time. This created savings, and compounded hardship. As food prices rose during the early 1980s, food stamp purchasing power declined and people reliant on stamps were left with relatively lower benefits.

After being the vehicle for a variety of cuts and measures to limit eligibility, OBRA itself became the reason for future budget conservatism. OBRA, and the budget targets it necessitated, delinked the funding of food welfare programs from changing levels of need based on the broader economy. Welfare spending became contentious not just because programs were seen as less beneficial, but as a consequence of being more painful to fund.¹⁰⁵ This mirrors the earlier problem posed when Congress reinstated caps on the FSP. Jeffrey Berry, whose work on the FSP came out in 1984, forecast that “budget deficits projected for coming years will continue to put pressure on large welfare programs like food stamps.”¹⁰⁶ Administration officials explained that these changes were simply to direct public assistance “toward those who are in need, and not provide it to families with more affluence that don’t really need it.”¹⁰⁷ OBRA changed the realm of the possible. No longer was the basic question of need at the forefront of politicians’ minds. Neither was the question about the size of programs government could afford to finance given budget constraints. Instead, OBRA marks a turn to punitive program administration designed to shrink welfare rolls for the purpose of expunging the undeserving, and making the program so stingy that only the “truly needy” remained.

¹⁰² Food stamp values are calculated based on the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, not pegged to the more general measure of the consumer price index (CPI), which was used in calculating benefit values for many other welfare programs.

¹⁰³ Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 118.

¹⁰⁴ USDA, “From Food Stamps to the Supplemental Nutrition Program: Legislative Timeline,” at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/timeline.pdf>, accessed 21 March 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Monica Prasad, *The Politics of Free Markets: The Rise of Neoliberal Economic Policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13.

¹⁰⁶ Berry, *Feeding Hungry People*, 151.

¹⁰⁷ Steven R. Weisman, “Reagan Abandons Proposal to Pare School Nutrition,” *New York Times*, 26 Sept. 1981, 1.

CONCLUSION

Program growth during the 1970s hid the political challenges that food stamps faced. By the numbers, the food stamp program appeared to be on a stable, expansionary path throughout the 1970s. Thanks to entitlement budgeting and looser eligibility criteria coupled with economic recession the FSP expanded far beyond budget projections. But fissures emerged in the understanding of the nature and extent of public responsibility for relief from hunger, in large part because the program grew so rapidly while media depictions increasingly vilified welfare recipients as frauds and cheats. Opening up the conversation of minimizing a right to food assistance due to budget constraints in the 1970s made it more politically feasible to delegitimize food aid for the poor. The 1970s were a pivotal decade for food welfare, one that saw a rearticulation of the public/private boundaries of responsibility for freedom from hunger.

At first glance, the changes to food welfare programs in the 1980s map onto austerity politics of the previous decade. Budget cuts in the 1980s severely impacted the ability of poor individuals to purchase food and of the private sector to meet the needs of the hungry, just as under Nixon, Ford, and Carter during a decade of recession. But in one vital respect, the Reagan administration marked a break from past efforts to cut food welfare spending. Instead of merely shrinking programs, the administration changed the fundamental nature of public food provision, supported by a legislature and judiciary more amenable to ideologically motivated attempts to shrink welfare budgets as well as the size of the federal state. Hunger was redefined as outside the scope of public responsibility for all but the poorest. By arguing that food welfare could (and should) be at least in part a local and voluntary responsibility, the Reagan administration was able to step back fully from a commitment to ending hunger. These changes created a new relationship between public- and private-sector provision, part of a broader politics of disentanglement.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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